

Homily for February 14th 2021

6th Week of Ordinary Time

“They know if you're sick and they care when you die”.

59 years ago, when the speaker of The US House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn discovered that he had terminal cancer, he shocked everyone when he announced that he was going back to his small town in Bonham, Texas. Everyone said to him:

They have got the finest facilities in Washington, D. C., why go back to that little town.

Rayburn's words capture the theme for today's homily.

"Because in Bohman, Texas, they know if you're sick and they care when you die.

Speaker Rayburn needed community. Let's think about this word for a minute. It comes from a late 14th century word meaning “the common people”. And is associated with the word, “commonness and everybody”.

Now think about that in relation to this seasoned politician, who had lived his life at the centre of political power. He served as the Speaker of the House from 1940-1961 – the longest anyone ever served as Speaker - and was first elected in 1913. He was in Washington for 48 years. But when the time came for him to die, he wanted to be with the common people, because they “know if you're sick and they care when you die”.

Community, this is at the heart of what the body of Christ is all about. And what is it that joins each of us together? Participating, in Holy Communion. That's worth pondering. We are not just a communion, we are a Holy Communion who share in that most common meal, the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist. It doesn't matter your socio-economic status, your race, gender, education; political affiliation. This is because in the eyes of Jesus we all matter. He holds us in his heart and calls us to himself so he can touch us with his holy, generous hands of love.

In today's Gospel we are introduced to a man who knew nothing of community, but only isolation. We know from the Old Testament passage from Leviticus that one with Leprosy:

shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

Dwell in a habitation outside the camp; aka - a Leper Colony. It seems incredible to us today, but on the edge of every large city in the ancient world huge pits were dug, and in those pits lived the lepers of the community – those colonies where everyone else forming that community would stand out by his skin disease, dress, disheveled hair and announcement: “Unclean, unclean”. A community for those who had no community.

In our world today, we have an appreciation about disease that can be easily transmitted in a way that makes this story timelier than it would have been in our pre-COVID world. The experience

of isolation, the wearing of masks, the lack of gathering, fear in touching one another helps us to identify with the unease the people in today's Gospel would have experienced. Here was someone who couldn't answer "no" to the COVID questions of his day, and showed up for worship in the local synagogue at Capernaum.

What happens when fear takes over is people do not act, they react. We have seen this in relation to COVID but would have been much more acute in the response to leprosy. Reactions to leprosy were both swift and cruel. Leper's could be put to death by their own family. And if, by some remote possibility, they did escape this hovel of a colony and venture out into the streets, they would be quickly greeted with shouts of "leper," accompanied by stones to make them keep their distance. In Jesus' day a leper by law could not get within 45 metres of a clean person. So this was the heart of the matter. Not only did these wretched poor people have to endure the trials of an incurable affliction, they also were isolated from society and kept from the community of faith. The horror of disease, a lifestyle of loneliness, isolation and hopelessness where could they find hope? The only friend a leper had was Jesus himself. In this life they were doomed. It was walking death.

And yet knowing all this, the man, comes to Jesus with humble, trusting faith: Do you hear his cry as he kneels before the Lord?

"If you will, you can make me clean."

He doesn't come demanding but pleading – entrusting his life to the will of the saviour. How tender is Jesus' response:

41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean."

Can you appreciate what this would have meant to this man? Rather than his touch infecting Jesus, Jesus' touch heals the man. Then Jesus directs him to go to the priest, who on pronouncing him clean can then restore him to the Community.

I think this is such an important picture for our day and what it means to be the Church. We are not going to primarily draw people to Jesus through sound argument – although there is a place for what is called apologetics. But in this soundbite world there are so many words. What is most required today, I believe, is the continued formation of St. Peter's as a place where people encounter the loving touch of Jesus – be it through our website, but most importantly when they come among us. As we look to the day when we are able to receive more people at Mass and re-establish our varied ministries I want to be aware of all those who have felt like lepers, isolated and cut off from the world? How many today, have virtual communities but no places where they experience Holy Communion?

May we ponder upon this story and continue to intentionally foster at St. Peter's a place that's like, well like Bonham Texas where:

"They know if you're sick and they care when you die".